

**RELG 309**  
**World Religions and the Cultures They Create**  
**3.000 Credit hours**  
**Fall 2020**



*And one of the scribes came to Him and said, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head." Matthew 8:20*

*He who dreams of drinking wine may weep when morning comes; he who dreams of weeping may in the morning go off to hunt ... And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. Zhuangzi*

*O Marvel! A garden amidst the flames. My heart has become capable of every form. Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi*

Due to Covid-19, the course will be delivered remotely. The only synchronous remote sessions will be the Conferences to be held on Tuesdays 10:35 am – 11:25 am. For the modalities of asynchronous delivery and posting of the Lectures, see below under 'Course Organization.'

**Duration: Sep 03 – Dec 01, 2020**

**Instructor:** Armando Salvatore [armando.salvatore@mcgill.ca](mailto:armando.salvatore@mcgill.ca)  
*Keenan Chair in Interfaith Studies, Professor of Global Religious Studies (Society and Politics)*

**Teaching Assistant:** Jason Blakeburn [jason.blakeburn@mcgill.ca](mailto:jason.blakeburn@mcgill.ca) also for questions concerning coursework and assignments.

## Course Outline

This course explores *a large spectrum of religious traditions, situated in the cultural contexts from which they originated and that they contributed to shape*. We will engage in a voyage across diverse, and yet interconnected, religious traditions, both “Eastern” and “Western.” We will focus on the intense interaction between human consciousness and cultural symbols innervating religious ideas and practices.

More specifically, the course will address:

- a) The ‘Axial Age’ or *The Age of the Sages* (the title of the textbook), i.e. the historic epoch (ca. 800-200 BCE) that saw the rise of the first transcendence-based religions via multiple, yet converging, cultural revolutions and political upheavals.
- b) The later rise of Abrahamic religions culminating in the formation of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, which straddled the conventional faultline separating Eastern and Western religions and cultures.
- c) The contemporary significance of religious cultures for being a global citizen in an increasingly interconnected world.

The course requires a solid interest in discussing questions concerning the social, cultural, and political significance of a variety of religions. Ideally this interest should have been cultivated through the previous attendance of a relevant 200-level course within Religious Studies (in particular RELG 204, RELG 207, RELG 252, or RELG 253) or elsewhere.

Restrictions: Not open to students who have taken RELG 208.

## Course Materials

The main textbook is Mark Muesse, *The Age of the Sages: The Axial Age in Asia and the Near East* (Fortress Press, 2013). The book is available as an [ebook](#) at McGill library. Copies of the book will be available at Paragraph Bookstore (2220 McGill College, tel. 514 845 5811), with the additional possibility, this term, to order them remotely. The textbook is also available on several online book retailers in various countries.

The second work that provides key insights into to our themes is Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Belknap Press, 2011), also available as an [ebook](#) at McGill library. This work has a higher level of difficulty, but the instructor will select and summarize its most salient content in the lectures. While this textbook provides some readings for just three different weeks, we recommend taking into consideration also other parts of the book, including the chapters on Ancient India and China, when preparing the two main (midterm and final) assignments.

For a lighter and yet insightful (and entertaining) reading on the Axial Age, you may also want to look into this work of fiction: Gore Vidal, *Creation: A Novel* (Penguin Random House, 2002), also accessible as an [ebook](#).

All other assigned readings will be posted on myCourses.

### **Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this course, students should be able

- a) to understand the dynamic character of religious traditions, both in their inner transformations over time and their interactions with other traditions;
- b) to situate the transformations of religious traditions in their historical, cultural and political contexts;
- c) to acquire a solid intercultural literacy by moving beyond false dichotomies still prevailing in the study of religion: Eastern-Western, religious-secular, theistic-nontheistic, primitive-developed.

### **Course Organization and Instructional Methods**

The weekly lectures will be pre-recorded and posted on myCourses on Wednesdays (starting September 2). In order to reduce the length of each lecture, the instructor will record and post two, or three (rarely four) weekly lecture units, each lasting between 20 and 30 minutes, and labeled as 'parts' of the weekly program (Part I, II, etc.). In order to allow equal access also on lower bandwidth, recordings will be provided as simple audio files. Each unit/part should be considered one module of the weekly program. The program is listed below in the Calendar and will be supported by the use of PowerPoint slides, whose number will be mentioned in the audio recordings, allowing you to follow simultaneously the recording and the slides. The slides will be posted on myCourses on Wednesdays as well. The slides will include useful, skeletal course notes but cannot replace listening to the lectures and studying the assigned readings. Links to videos with documentary films may also be added. Please note that based on McGill regulations both lecture recordings and slides are for exclusive use within this class and should not be shared outside of it.

There will be online Zoom conferences on Tuesdays during the scheduled class time (10:35-11:25 EST) with the presence of the instructor and moderated by the TA. The first Tuesday conference will take place on [September 15](#). Moreover, there will be a shorter Zoom session also on [September 8](#), in order to present the teaching team and respond to your initial questions on content and organization. There will be two Zoom practical sessions on [October 13](#) and [December 1<sup>st</sup>](#), replacing Zoom conferences on those same days, to explain the midterm and final assignments.

Zoom conferences, assisted by the TA, will start with a plenary Q&A session with the instructor, followed by small group sessions moderated by the TA and finalized to preparing the online forum discussions (see below). Only the Q&A sessions of the Zoom conferences

may be recorded and posted on myCourses, should no problems occur. Active participation in the conferences is recommended also to perform well in all aspects of the course, including the online forum discussions. For students who are in a time zone that is unsuitable for participating in the scheduled Zoom conferences (Tuesdays 10:35am EST), separate ad hoc Zoom conference sessions may be arranged. Should this apply to your situation, please email your TA at your earliest convenience before the end of the add/drop period.

Online forum discussions are the third dimension of the course. Each student will be assigned by the TA to a group of 6-8 students for the duration of the course. Students will weekly post on myCourses substantive responses to the readings on Saturdays, beginning September 12 (see below under 'Assignments and Evaluation'). They will then have a few days to read the responses of the other members of their group and post by Wednesday evening in their assigned group discussion forums on myCourses at least 2 commentaries or replies to, respectively, the responses and questions of their group peers—beginning September 16, i.e. after the live group discussions in the Tuesday Zoom conferences, beginning September 15. Prior to this date the TA will communicate to each student the group they are assigned.

## **Assignments and Evaluation**

### *Reading Responses (20%)*

Each student is responsible for completing a minimum of 9 weekly reading responses due Saturdays at 11:59pm during Weeks 1-12 (the first, due September 12), to be posted in the student's assigned small group online discussion forum on myCourses. Each weekly reading response should address at least 2 of the weekly readings (or the weekly documentary film, when available) and be 200-250 words in length. Ideally, the largest part of a response should accurately summarize the main themes of the readings, followed by one sentence creating broader connections (whether to previous class material or the recorded lectures), and ending with 1-2 clearly marked questions for further discussion (please separate each question with a bullet point).

### *Online Discussion Forum Commentaries/Replies (10%)*

Each student is responsible for replying to the reading responses and questions of their peers in the online discussion forums on myCourses due Wednesdays at 11:59pm during Weeks 2 to 12, with the exception of Week 6, because of the mid-term that will be given that week. Each student should contribute at least 2 replies in each weekly online discussion forums they participate in, for a minimum of 6 weeks. These replies should be short and thoughtful, contributing meaningfully and respectfully to a discussion among peers.

*Reading Responses and Forum Replies* will require both sufficient quantity (posting the minimum number of times) and quality. They will be assessed on a grid of three grades: 'Satisfactory' (full points), 'Needing improvement' (half points), and 'Unsatisfactory/Incomplete' (zero points).

*Take-home midterm assignment (30% of the final grade)*, due on Saturday, October 17, by 6pm. The take-home midterm will consist of three parts, each consisting of three questions. Each student must answer three questions overall, choosing one question from each part. These answers should be at least 300 words each, so that the total length of the submitted work should amount to no less than 900 and no more than 1200 words. The assignment questions will be posted on myCourses no later than October 12. The midterm will cover the first five weeks and the Intro week. The assignment should be submitted via myCourses. Assignments submitted after the due date without a serious, valid and well-documented justification will receive a 3% reduced grade per day late.

*Take-home final assignment (40% of the final grade)* due on Monday, December 7, (unless otherwise determined by the Examination Office). The same modalities of the midterm apply, with following differences: answers should be at least 400 words each, so that the total length of the submitted work should amount to no less than 1200 and no more than 1500 words. The assignment questions will be posted on myCourses no later than December 2. The final will cover Week 6 to the end of the course. However, it may also include more general and/or comparative questions that require knowledge acquired in the earlier weeks.

The TA will play an active role in the grading process but all grades will be confirmed with the instructor. The assessment rubric consist of accuracy of content (40%), style (20%), and originality of interpretation (40%).

Informal questions about grades for midterm or final assignments should be submitted immediately to the TA. Formal requests for grade reassessments must be made within 7 working days of the publication of the grades. The reviewer will be neither the instructor nor the TA, will be appointed by the School of Religious Studies, and will assess the fairness of the original grade rather than mark anew the assignment. The procedure may end up with confirming, raising *or* lowering the original grade.

The TA is responsible for sharing with you a package of norms and good practices for correct quotations and avoiding plagiarism.

### **Email Correspondence**

Please use your McGill student email and identify yourself with your name and student number. Email the TA with basic questions about content, assignments, and grading. If problems are not solved, you are welcome to email the instructor. For complex questions, an online meeting can be arranged by appointment.

## **Disabilities**

If you have a disability please contact first the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD), <https://www.mcgill.ca/osd/> (tel. 514-398-6009). After that, if they recommend to do so, you are welcome to contact the instructor to discuss your situation. It is our common goal to make sure that all your learning needs will be accommodated, while the matter will be treated with the necessary degree of confidentiality.

## **Some key McGill regulations**

1) Languages: In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. Conformément à la Charte des droits de l'étudiant de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté

2) Academic Integrity Statement [approved by Senate on 29 January 2003]:

*McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see <https://www.mcgill.ca/deanofstudents/plagiarism> for more information).*

3) In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

**All other McGill regulations apply:** <https://www.mcgill.ca/students/exams/regulations>

## CALENDAR

\*Please note that links to the ebooks of Muesse and Bellah have been provided under 'Course Materials.' All other readings are posted on myCourses.

### **Intro Week (No Zoom session/conference; no assigned readings)**

Human Consciousness and the Creation of Meaning

### **Week 1 (Zoom Intro Session Sept 8)**

From 'Powerful Beings' to Earth Goddesses (South America and Europe/Mediterranean)

- Bellah, *Tribal Religion: The Production of Meaning*, pp. 131-146 [on myCourses]
- Balzer, *Mystics, Shamans, and Visionary Arts* [on myCourses]
- Downing, *Prehistoric Goddesses: The Cretan Challenge* [on myCourses]

### **Week 2 (Zoom Conference Sept 15)**

From Sky Gods to the Wise Lord (Central Asia and Iran)

- Muesse, Chapter 1. *The Noble Ones*
- Muesse, Chapter 2. *The World of Zoroaster*
- Muesse, Chapter 3. *Zoroaster's Legacy*

### **Week 3 (Zoom Conference Sept 22)**

Among the Most Ancient Scriptures: The Vedas (South Asia I)

- Muesse, Introduction. *What Was the Axial Age?*
- Muesse, Chapter 4. *South Asia before the Axial Age*
- Muesse, Chapter 5. *The Start of the Indian Axial Age*
- Muesse, Chapter 6. *Death and Rebirth*

### **Week 4 (Zoom Conference Sept 29)**

The End of the Vedas/Vedanta and Hinduism (South Asia II)

- Muesse, Chapter 7. *The Quest for Liberation*
- Muesse, Chapter 8. *The Vedantic Solution*
- Muesse, Chapter 9. *The One and the Many*

## **Week 5 (Zoom Conference Oct 6)**

### Beyond the Vedas: The Rise of Buddhism (South Asia III)

- Muesse, Chapter 10. *The Life of Siddhartha Gautama*
- Muesse, Chapter 11. *"I Am Awake"*
- Muesse, Chapter 12. *Why We Suffer*
- Muesse, Chapter 13. *The Noble Path*

## **Week 6 (Zoom Practical Session Oct 13)**

### Archaic Origins and Confucianism (East Asia I)

- Muesse, Chapter 16. *East Asia before the Axial Age*
- Muesse, Chapter 17. *The World of Confucius*
- Muesse, Chapter 18. *The Foundations of Confucianism*
- Muesse, Chapter 19. *The Cultivation of Virtue*

## **Week 7 (Zoom Conference Oct 20)**

### Daoism (East Asia II)

- Muesse, Chapter 20. *Early Confucianism and the Rise of Daoism*
- Muesse, Chapter 21. *The Daodejing*
- Muesse, Chapter 22. *Daoist Politics and Mysticism*
- Hyo-Dong Lee, *The Psychophysical Energy of the Way in Daoist Thought* [on myCourses]

## **Week 8 (Zoom Conference Oct 27)**

### Greek Mysteries and Philosophy (Eastern Mediterranean I)

- Bellah, Chapter 7. *The Axial Age II. Ancient Greece*, only pp. 352-398
- Hermann, *Pythagoras*, only pp. 19-36 [on myCourses]
- Bussanich, *Reincarnation and Salvation in Magna Graecia and Plato* [on myCourses]

## **Week 9 (Zoom Conference Nov 3)**

### Ancient Israel and the Rise of Christianity (Eastern Mediterranean II)

- Bellah, Chapter 6. *The Axial Age I. Ancient Israel*, only pp. 289-323
- Eisenstadt, *The Secondary Breakthrough in Ancient Israelite Civilization—The Second Commonwealth and Christianity* [on myCourses]
- Cohen, *Constructing Judaism and Christianity* [on myCourses]



## **Week 10 (Zoom Conference Nov 10)**

### The Rise of Islam (Middle East)

- Stroumsa, *Introduction: From Qumran to Qur'an: The Religious Worlds of Late Antiquity* [on myCourses]
- Cohen, *Islam: Religion, Politics, and the State* [on myCourses]
- Khan, *Ihsan: Classical and Contemporary Understanding* [on myCourses]

## **Week 11 (Zoom Conference Nov 17)**

### Abrahamic Religions (Interfaith Relations I)

- Stroumsa, *The History of Religions as a Subversive Discipline: Comparing Judaism, Christianity and Islam* [on myCourses]
- Stroumsa *Three Rings or Three Impostors? The Comparative Approach to the Abrahamic Religions and its Origins* [on myCourses]
- Pormann *The Abrahamic Religions and the Classical Tradition* [on myCourses]

## **Week 12 (Zoom Conference Nov 24)**

### Islam and Buddhism (Interfaith Relations II)

- Yusuf, *Islam and Buddhism: Relations from Balkh to Bangkok and Tokyo* [on myCourses]
- Obuse, *Finding God in Buddhism: A New Trend in Contemporary Buddhist Approaches to Islam* [on myCourses]
- Obuse, *The Muslim Doctrine of Prophethood in the Context of Buddhist-Muslim Relations in Japan: Is the Buddha a Prophet?* [on myCourses]

## **Final Week (only Zoom Practical Session Dec 1st)**